

REINTERPRETING MITHRAS: A VERY DIFFERENT ACCOUNT

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Attilio Mastrocinque: The Mysteries of Mithras. A different account. (Orientalische Religionen in der Antike 24.) Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2017. – 363 p. – ISBN 978 3 16 155112 3

The study of the Roman cult of Mithras (known since the 1970's as Mithraic studies¹) and its subject of research labeled often with the modern notion of "Mithraism"² produced numerous important works in the recent years, focusing on the coexistence of global and local aspects of the cult,³ its cognitive perspectives,⁴ the afterlife aspects but also analyzing the material evidence of the cult in a larger framework of the Roman religious communication and its iconographic languages.⁵ Similarly, new studies emerged focusing on the pre-Roman aspects and iconographic influences on the Roman cult of Mithras⁶ the religious experiences within the sanctuaries⁷ and on the Persianism as cultural agent in the cult formation and maintenance.⁸ In this historiographic abundance is indeed, a challenge and provocation to write a new book with such an ambitious, but also "mysterious" title, as A. Mastrocinque's new book.

Known from many of his important previous work on Mithraic studies,⁹ the author acknowledged in the Preface of his new book, that he tried to "abandon the established scholarly orthodoxy about Mithraism", trying to introduce a radically new idea in the interpretation of this cult which produced only in the last two decades numerous monographs. One of the challenges of this book lies in this ambitious statement: is there really a scholarly orthodoxy about Mithraism in the 21st century? The book of Mastrocinque avoid to answer this particular question, but gives an unusual glimpse or alternative for the interpretation of the archaeological and philological material, focusing on the relationship of imperial power and propaganda and the formation and evolution of "Mithraism".

In the first chapter Mastrocinque gives an introduction of the "basic elements of Mithraism" (pp. 1–40), where he presents the philological and archaeological sources of the seven grades of initiation, a notion and concept which he presents as granted and universal, although the archaeological evidence of these initiatory grades are extremely sporadic and geographically limited.¹⁰ The next subchapter focuses on the initiatory rituals: here one can observe the great philological knowledge and expertise of the author. An abundance of almost all the known literary

¹ JMS I. 1975. The notion – after Richard L. Gordon – was used for the first time by J. Hinnells. See: GORDON 2007, 394 with his paradigmatic statement suggesting the abandonment of the notion of Mithraism.

² Since ROBERTSON 1890.

³ DIRVEN–McCARTY 2014.

⁴ MARTIN 2014; PANAGIOTIDOU–BECK 2017.

⁵ FARAONE 2013.

⁶ ADRYCH *et al.* 2017.

⁷ DIRVEN 2015.

⁸ GORDON 2016. For further reflections on the recent state of the research, see: BELAYCHE–MASTROCINQUE 2013; NEMETI 2016.

⁹ MASTROCINQUE 1998; MASTROCINQUE 2009; BELAYCHE–MASTROCINQUE 2013.

¹⁰ See also: BREMMER 2014.

and archaeological, iconographic sources are presented together, although many of the relevant quotes are cited in the footnotes. Mastrocinque identified an interesting, late-antique, 7th century Syrian text and other literary sources,¹¹ which he used to interpret the Leones, the fourth grade of initiation, as an important step of becoming a wise person, a “philosopher” (*sophistes*). He omits, however, to interpret these Persianisms in a broader context of exoticism, as agents in the Roman religious “market”.¹² In a subchapter he returns to his old idea, that the Mithraic initiation influenced early Gnosticism and their imaginary of the hypercosmic divine world, however the author stressed also here, that we should get rid of the preconceived idea that the mysteries of Mithras were a sort of pagan Christianity. Particularly interesting is his interpretation of the so called Mithraic ladder, indentified recently on a carved gem and on a vase from Carnuntum, too. After discussing two other basic elements of the Roman mysteries of Mithras, the cosmic cave and the two niches in the Mithraic cave, Mastrocinque’s first chapter focuses on theories on the cultural origin of Mithraism,¹³ ask the question how Christian was Roman Mithraism and finally, shows very accurately the major research topics of the contemporary Mithraic studies, emphasizing the new idea of Christopher Faraone, which had an important impact in the scholarship right after he published his seminal work in 2013.¹⁴

The second chapter of the book presents already the novelty and radical ideas of Mastrocinque, where he presents the evolution of the Roman Mithras cult in relationship with the formation of the Hellenistic kingship and imperial ideology and propaganda. Mastrocinque’s main hypothesis is that Roman Mithraism as a religious idea, theological program and iconographic language was formed hand by hand with the imperial ideology and influenced – if not even founded – by the very close entourage of Augustus. Although he is aware, that the very first attestation of the Roman cult of Mithras in Rome is from the time of Nero, who was visited by king Tiridates of Armenia, who brought the magii in Rome¹⁵ and the cult entered in the Latin literary tradition only in the Flavian period (Statius, *Thebais*), Mastrocinque argues with etymological and iconographic examples from the Persian and Hellenistic periods, that the Persian and later, Hellenistic Mithra cult was already strictly a ruler-cult, related and shaped by the kings and emperors and their intellectual elite. Mastrocinque tries to convince the readers that the symbolism of Victoria with the imperial eagle, the apotheosis of the emperors, the solar nature of the rulers and the “*invictus*” epithet are those links, which can be considered as arguments for the concomitant formation of imperial ideology and Mithraism. The deified Augustus, as a “New Apollo” is presented in this book as a strong influence for Roman Mithraism: Augustus-Apollo is analyzed as a Roman version of well known Hellenistic Mithras-Helios. As for a catalytic moment of this transition from the Hellenistic Mithra to the Roman Mithras, Mastrocinque chose the battle of Actium. The novelty of this chapter – and the quintessence of his book – lies on the pages 82–83 which argues, that somewhere between 27 B.C. and 14 A.D. there was a theologian, who was able to distinguish between Mithras and the Roman Sol, as two similar, but different beings and places Mithras in the world of hypercosmic gods as the model of both Sol and the Emperor. Mastrocinque here follows numerous previous scholars, who argued that there was one Founder,¹⁶ a brilliant theologian, who consciously created a religious bricolage, mixing together the Roman Apollo-Divus Augustus cult with particular elements of the Hellenistic Mithra cult and Persianisms, as exotic, attractive agents, the Roman sacrificial rituals and created a “Platonic idea of the Emperor”. Mastrocinque tries to illustrate this scenario with the famous Grand Camée de France, where in the upper part, among the divinities appears a young male figure dressed in a “Persian” dress, holding a globus,¹⁷ identified in older literature with Ganymedes, Aion, Alexander the Great, Aeneas, Julius, Phraatakes, Apollo and also with Mithras.¹⁸ Mastrocinque argued that the figure should be Mithras, because of its astronomic position in the constellations, based on the birthday and house of Augustus in the Libra and the description of Porphyry on the house of Mithras. Another iconographic element,

¹¹ Corpus Christianorum, *Seria Graeca* 27.4.6 and 4.46.

¹² GORDON 2017.

¹³ In this subchapter he is much distanced and tries to express a balanced opinion about the possible origins of Roman “Mithraism”, placing the origins somewhere around Tarsus, Anatolian Hellenistic Kingdoms and Armenia. He omits to mention the project of A. Chalupa which is focusing exactly on this topic: CHALUPA 2016. Interestingly – and oddly – although the author already stated in the very first subchapter that Mithraism is a modern and anachronistic notion, he still uses in further chapters too.

¹⁴ FARAONE 2013.

¹⁵ His temple in Garni, Armenia is traditionally attributed to Mihr-Mithra. Although there are no specific iconographic or religious evidence for this, the presence of the Hellenistic Mithra cult in Armenia is well attested.

¹⁶ Among many, I. Tóth from Hungary argued for a singular founder.

¹⁷ The only „Persian” element is actually the special, long pants, which is however a symbol of Barbarians in Roman imperial iconography. It can easily a Dacian, Thracian, Anatolian figure too. The Phrygian cap is not certainly shaped.

¹⁸ This identification was first proposed by H. Jucker: JUCKER 1976.

where Mastrocinque tries to connect the early imperial ideology with the Mithraic visual language, is the salvation of the soul. He compared the little Amor-Eros representations in the apotheosis of Germanicus with the rare iconographic attestations of Eros on Mithraic reliefs.¹⁹ In his argumentation the author proves again his amazing ability to connect the sporadic archaeological material with an abundant literary corpus on Platonic ideas on soul and Eros. If we accept, however his innovative hypothesis, that Mithras – created by a single, anonymous Founder – entered the Roman religious market during the first Julio-Claudian emperors, why our archaeological and literary sources are completely missing from Rome in the first 90 years of the Principate? Contemporary studies on the formation, spread and diffusion of small group religions shows that these religious mechanisms spread as viruses: fast and through interpersonal (amical, familial) hubs and networks. The example of the cult of Glykon for example shows how a religious idea can spread in the interval of a single lifetime (30–40 years) and produce epigraphic and iconographic material too. Another basic question, which was not asked by Mastrocinque is: is it not possible, that this Platonic ideology and the first imperial iconographic program was actually used by the first Mithraic groups in the late Flavian period as an iconographic and theoretical schemata and not inverse?

Answering shortly and not always convincingly these questions (subchapters 46–49), the author continues his argumentation in the following chapters, analyzing in amazing details the left Predellas, the Central Scene of Tauroctony, the Upper and Right Predellas of the complex paneled reliefs (pp. 103–205). He argues that beside the iconographic similarities of the early imperial ideology, the Augustan literature and its obsession with prophecies and of a forthcoming New Age of Saturn can be identified with some of the elements on the left Predellas. In the interpretation of the tauroctony, Mastrocinque finds a suprising analogy: an *aureus* of Augustus from 18 B.C. representing the submission of Armenia. The scene represents a winged Victoria, representing the Emperor or the imperial ideology (the Empire) stubbing a kneeled bull, symbol of Armenia. After the author, this scene – a usual Roman ritual scene – was formed in the same period as the Mithraic tauroctony and the two scenes are basically represents the same idea: Mithras (the Emperor), the New Saturn save the world from enemies and creates security and peace, the new balance. The iconography of Mithraic relief here gains a radically new content, a historical, political and ideological message, instead of a religious or astronomic one, as it was interpreted before. All of the elements – the bull in the boat, the tauroctony, the two torchbearers, Saturnus, Oceanus, Aion, Eros – are interpreted as a consequence of the battle of Actium and the rise of Augustus and his political and intellectual entourage. Mastrocinque push his theory so far, that he even claims: “the left *predellas* recalled to mind the glorious past of the Roman people and the birth of the Empire. On the right *predellas* Mithras continues to play the role of Augustus and represents a mythical model of what Augustus really accomplished in his life. These *predellas* speak of political power, whereas the left ones spoke of the Saturnia regna, of the birth of a new humankind, after the catastrophes of the era, and of a new civilization introduced by Mithras. A relation between Mithras and Sol after the formation of the Empire could signify nothing other than the first emperor’s choosing a successor before his imminent departure from the earthly plain to reach the heavenly realms. Apollo-Mithras created the Empire, and the following emperors were like the Sun God, rulers of the cosmic world” (p. 174).

In the following chapters, Mastrocinque offers also an interesting and – as the entire book itself – unorthodox theory for the hypercosmic gods in the Mithraic pantheon. From the Mithraic triad, the most interesting is without doubt, the lion-headed god, which is identified by the author with Sandas, the god of the dead from Tarsus – another element which leads to the theory that the Founder of Roman Mithraism was for sure from Anatolia and knew very well the local religious iconography, mythology but also, an orphic cosmogony (Hellanicus or Hieronymus).

The following major chapters are presenting the sacred geography of the mithraeum – and topic where Richard L. Gordon’s seminal work from 1976 will remain probably unparalleled²⁰ – and system of planetary and hypercosmic gods, a category introduced by Mastrocinque to reflect the theogonic hierarchy of gods in the so called Mithraic pantheon. He also reconstructs a possible Mithraic triad (Lion-Headed Aion – Mithras – Aion with human head) and presumes the existence of two secret Mithraic scrolls depicted on a fresco from Dura Europos. Chapter 8 is another curious specificity of Mastrocinque’s book focusing on “Mithraism” and the Magic Arts. A particularly good encounter of the cognitive effects of the material evidence of the mithraea is presented in subchapter 68, where the author presents rare objects used to ensure and deepen the psychological effect of the mithraeum, as symbol of cosmos. While in some parts of this chapter Mastrocinque proves his amazing knowledge on the archaeological

¹⁹ He identified the flying figure of the Dragu relief with Eros, and not Lucifer, as the first publisher did: SZABÓ 2012.

²⁰ GORDON 1976.

material of the mithraea combining them with the literary sources, on other parts however, he seems to push some of his unorthodox theories too far (such as the use of prophetic skulls and voice-effects in the mithraeum in the baths of Caracalla). The last chapters of the book presents the interaction of the Cult of Mithras with other divinities, such as Serapis and Hekate and tries to reconstruct the last period of Roman “Mithraism” in the 4th and 5th centuries A.D.

The book of A. Mastrocinque is, without doubt, one of the major works written on the mysteries of Roman Mithras. It will or should be named among the seminal works written on these religious phenomena in the last 1.5 centuries. If F. Cumont is remembered as the “father” of modern Mithraism who reconstructed and recreated basically a “new” Persian-Roman Mithraism, M. Vermaseren as the patriarch of oriental religions, who focused on the archaeological sources of these cults, D. Ulansey and R. Beck as the promoters of the astronomical aspects of Mithraism, A. Mastrocinque will be quoted as the scholar, who associated Roman Mithras with Augustus. This idea is indeed unorthodox and almost, scandalous, worth to remember, indeed. However the abundant quantity of ancient literary sources and the archaeological material used in a very elegant symbiosis in his book is still not enough to prove his remarkable hypothesis, which in this case, will remain – as many other possible scenarios on the origins of Roman Mithraism – just a theory on an ancient religion which we cannot really understand in all of his details. Despite of the originality of his book and his central hypothesis, Mastrocinque’s book cannot answer the century long questions of the Mithraic studies: who, where and when was the Roman cult of Mithras founded? Did they have sacred texts or a central myth? Even if these questions seems to be unanswered, Mastrocinque’s book highlighted however some very important aspects. First of all, he proved that the Roman cult of Mithras is **not** an Oriental religion. Although the Founder or the founding group might come from Anatolia/ Armenia and used consciously Persianism to attract the new worshippers, the iconographic program of the Mithraic reliefs, the archaeological materiality of the sanctuaries and the geographic diffusion of the cult is totally Roman and is dependent of the Roman Empire. Mastrocinque – following the steps of John Miller and Chr. Faraone – proved in his book, that the imperial ideology, iconographic languages and the rich cultural networks formed in the age of Augustus, created a zeitgeist and a set of religious knowledge, which – at a certain moment by a certain person or group – was smashed together, creating a new religion, known in the High Empire as the “mysteries of Mithras” and nowadays as “Roman Mithraism” – a notion, which sadly the author didn’t ignore from his work, despite the fact, that this cult had numerous local appropriations and there was neither “one” Mithraism nor such religious identity in ancient polytheism.²¹

Although Mastrocinque’s book has an introductory chapter on the basic elements of the cult, his work is recommended more for scholars who already has a certain expertise in the study of the Roman cult of Mithras and the age of Augustus too.

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²¹ WOOLF 2017.

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